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THE PUPIL AND THE REQUIREMENT

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Last summer it was my privilege to meet socially a professor in one of the great colleges for women to which every year we send our quota of maidens, and I eagerly took advantage of the opportunity to say: "I have wished for several years to send a message to the faculty of —— College. I charge you to deliver it for me. It is this: *Youth is immature*. This is a fact which college authorities, especially those of women's colleges, do not suspect. Apparently it has never been called to their attention, but it is borne in upon my mind so forcibly, year by year, that I would gladly share my knowledge with them if I could."

The distinguished lady, whose department was not English literature but physical training, strange to say, had observed for herself that characteristic of youth, but she gave me no lively encouragement that she should be able to bring her colleagues to an understanding of it; and, indeed, I fear it is a thing only to be realized by those whose experience, day by day, forces them to face the condition, practically.

My complaint is that college instructors and professors of English, particularly in the women's colleges, expect our pupils to do work which they are not and cannot be fitted to do on account of the immutable laws of nature. These instructors understand clearly the capacities and limitations of the average girl of eighteen or nineteen whom we send to them, but they utterly fail to realize that she has not been eighteen or nineteen the four or five years during which she has been under our care.

No doubt there is a difference between the maturity of thought of a young woman of eighteen and the same young woman at twenty-two; this they realize. But this difference is as nothing compared with that between a girl of thirteen or fourteen and the same girl at seventeen or eighteen; and of this fact the college examiners in Eng-

lish are apparently quite unaware. They speak in their advice to us as if these girls had been uniformly during their high-school course at the stage of maturity in which they close it.

It is not thus, O my superiors! The children which we receive from the grammar school are little girls. The girl of thirteen, fourteen; or fifteen in the entering class is a child. Her hair is in pigtails, and I suspect, in some cases, that her dolls are still ranged on the nursery floor, discarded but not yet relegated to the attic. She is sweet, docile, and trustful. She has little or no acquaintance with literature, and less with life. What a prig she would be if it were otherwise!

Of course, I am speaking of the average girl. The exceptional girl exists; we all know her, and while we do what we can for her, yet it is plainly our duty to set the pace for the average girl, to round out her education, supply what is lacking, cultivate the powers that exist, and make our course and our requirements conform to her needs and capacities, not to those of the stray prodigy, who can usually take care of herself, and who, if she is occasionally bored by work more simple than she could master, at least is but one to suffer. Boredom is no doubt disagreeable, but it is a far more healthful state than the condition of nervous strain, sometimes amounting to absolute terror, into which children are thrown who are required to do things that they cannot comprehend. It is downright cruelty to expect a class of thirty to rise to the level of one mind much more mature than the rest. They cannot do it; and there is so much that they can do with profit, and often that they desperately need to do!

"Moving about in worlds not realized" calls up a delightful vision poetically; but what if one is expected to analyze the unrealized worlds, to write papers describing them, and to pass an examination to show that one has felt the proper sensations in the course of the journey?

These girls of average ability, in their first year in the high school, can read with pleasure and profit *Ivanhoe*, *Julius Caesar*, *Idylls of the King*, or works of that kind. They enjoy the narrative of the *Idylls* and appreciate the beauty of the diction, when it is judiciously pointed out to them, and understand and are in sympathy with the

noble ideals of the poems. *Julius Caesar* is, in some respects, the best textbook in the world. I have yet to see a pupil, boy or girl, so dull or so immature that he cannot study this play with interest and profit. From *Ivanhoe* our pupils can learn something of the structure of the novel as a literary type, and assimilate a great deal of "background" for future literary and historical studies. In the course of fourteen years' experience in teaching English, how often have I groped around for some common ground of knowledge in my class, with which to compare or to correlate some literary reference, and met only blank, unresponsive looks, until I hit upon *Ivanhoe*; then there was instant response. Let us be thankful for *Ivanhoe* and all it contains of chivalry, history, and etymology, in the form that a child can understand.

What the child cannot do, however, is to compare *Ivanhoe* with other masterpieces: for she has not read them. Dickens is absolutely unknown to her; Thackeray as remote from her experience as Kant; Hawthorne and Cooper, mere names. Ask her to write an essay upon her favorite story, and—if she has been properly brought up—it will be *Little Women* or *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*; if her reading has been less carefully watched, it may be one of Bertha M. Clay's or "The Duchess." In poetry she will be even farther at sea. One can count on the average girl's familiarity with a few poems of Longfellow, and that is all.

If you have the good luck to teach a class which comes from fairly intelligent homes, half its number will not make glaring errors in spelling and punctuation; but duty to the other half demands constant practice upon these subjects. The compositions which the pupils write will be childlike in their simplicity and naïveté, and, if you are so fortunate as to arouse their enthusiasm, the fresh joy of youth in their work, their charming discoveries of things centuries old, will bring tears of pride and pleasure to your eyes; but of the keen, discriminating, mature literary criticism, which is founded upon wide reading and comparison, there will not be a trace, and there ought not to be.

When our little girls come back to us at the beginning of their second year, they show a very great growth in maturity of thought. Many things that were completely beyond them the previous year

are now easily within their grasp. This development has come "by nature;" it is not in the power of any teacher or training to produce it before it is due. Indeed, when I see so much brought about that is absolutely independent of school discipline, I should become skeptical as to the value of training in English at all if now and then, once in a few years, a pupil did not appear who, by reason of illness or some other cause, has omitted the English work for a half-year, trusting to read it up by herself, or, if necessary, to "take a few lessons" upon it later on; the blanks in the equipment of such a one always restore my self-respect.

At the beginning of the third year the pupils have taken a still more noticeable stride in the direction of maturity. The days of dolls, which were definitely in sight during their first year, now seem to them very far in the past. Dresses are dropped to the tops of the boots, or even to the ankles. Mentally they are ready to understand and appreciate, with careful training, such a work as Macaulay's *Essay on Milton*, and to discuss intelligently his famous paradox regarding poetry and civilization. They can read the *Ancient Mariner* without regarding it as a comic poem; they can read *Comus*, though it is unsuited to them; and they can understand something of *Lycidas*, with considerable help. Burke and *Macbeth*, in my judgment, ought to be reserved for the fourth year, though I have known more than one class of pupils in their third year to get much good from the study of these works. What I maintain, however, is that the work in these lines or in any others must be done with a difference. As well expect original thought of a mature sort from girls of sixteen as expect the discovery of radium from a high-school student. Supposing we might for a moment imagine that he could hit upon it, he wouldn't know what it was or what to do with it; so with our pupils—they have only glimmering ideas of relative values. The flat, stale, and unprofitable is new to them and often arouses their keenest interest, while what is really new and in the line of modern investigation is at present beyond their appreciation.

To us who are older, no doubt, it savors of the trite to say that Macaulay used many antitheses, that Milton wrote sublime poetry, that Shakespeare was a great delineator of character; but these things are absolutely new to most of our pupils. They must learn to see and to

appreciate such facts for themselves before they are prepared to meddle with the subtleties of literary criticism. Sometimes I think that those in authority over us believe that our school-girls learn essentials by intuition, so much is taken for granted.

In a volume of the questions for the "Middle States and Maryland" examinations I find the following:

1. Analyze the plot of the *Merchant of Venice*, showing the different elements and the way in which they are combined into one play.

Does this seem to you a fair question to ask of a girl who has had to get ready also for examinations in Latin, Greek, mathematics, Greek and Roman history, and either a modern language or a science? Is it not rather a question suitable for a professor of English literature, who has made a thorough study of the play and has had leisure to meditate upon it with mature understanding?

2. Discuss Tennyson as a story-teller, pointing out how far you think the interest of *The Princess* lies in the narrative.

This is one of those searching questions implying the maturity of thought, judgment, and wide reading. How shall one discuss Tennyson as a story-teller if one has read no other narrative in verse? Or should we compare him with Miss Alcott or The Duchess?

3. Analyze either Macaulay's *Essay on Addison* or his *Essay on Milton* so as to show its construction, noting the development of the theme and its main transitions.

Now, I think that I could answer this question myself. Long, painful, and, alas, often unwilling practice in analyzing these two essays have made the lines of thought, together with the various ramifications and digressions in them, as familiar to me as the Mother-Goose of my childhood; but did anyone ever seriously believe that an ordinary school-girl ought to be expected to carry in her head the ground plan of these two essays? Human nature revolts at the thought.

To be sure, many of our girls enter "on certificate" and are not obliged to pass the examinations at all. Very true, but still the examinations set a certain standard to which those pupils who are certified are expected to conform. Verily, such questions as these are binding heavy burdens and grievous to be borne around the necks of these little ones.

A recent paper in the *School Review* by one of the faculty of a great woman's college says:

Every student should be so thoroughly trained in the art of investigating that he will know immediately where to look for the information which he needs in the endeavor to understand certain passages in his text. To know the best sources of information is to know how to study with scholarly precision and self-reliance. If, in a volume, a reference is made to a fact in history, a student should know, in order to look for an elucidation of this, the names of the best histories of America, of England, and of the world, and so be able to turn at once, without waste of time, to an accepted authority. If a reference to a geographical spot is found, he should be prepared to look up the place on the map and fix upon his mind the special surroundings. If a reference to classical mythology enters, he should turn to the classical dictionary and find out the facts that are essential to a clear understanding of the allusion. If a famous person is mentioned, he should know where to turn in order to inform himself of the life-history of that person as recorded in trustworthy biographical dictionaries. If a new word is discovered in his text, he should turn at once to the dictionary and discover for himself the four essential facts in regard to it: derivation, pronunciation, meaning, and synonyms.

In the days of the "Committee of Ten" a teacher of much wisdom and experience said to me that his only criticism upon their report was that it left the pupil entirely out of account. Now let us take the pupil into account in relation to the above admirable ideal. Let us say that she is a girl of sixteen, and at half-past two in the afternoon she has finished her dinner and is ready for her afternoon studying. She begins with her Greek, which takes an hour and a half of hard work. It is then four o'clock. Latin requires another hour and a half; it is then half-past five. She has time to begin her algebra before supper, but hardly more than that. She has a supper at six o'clock, in the average American home in this part of the country, and her mother is not willing that she should sit down to her books again until seven; so she takes a little walk. She finishes her algebra at eight, if she has good luck; and then comes a lesson on *Lycidas*, we will say. Do you really think that she is in a condition mentally to comply with the above requirement in the spirit in which it is intended to be taken? Don't you think, if you were in her place, you might neglect or shirk the least bit finding out all about

"Where the great Vision of the guarded mount
Looks toward Namancos and Bayona's hold."

I have in mind a girl of sixteen who never would shirk the least

thing, but she boarded away from home and habitually went to bed at one o'clock, which, I claim, is a wicked thing, even at peril of her not knowing "all the facts which are essential to a clear understanding of the allusion." I know a boy of considerable conscientiousness who lost fifteen precious minutes last year trying to look up the word "austere" which had occurred in a dictated paragraph upon his English lesson. He could find it in no dictionary, but, happening to mention the circumstance to his mother, he learned that it wasn't to be sought under *os*, where he had been hopefully looking. If a student spends fifteen minutes looking up one word, how long will it take him to learn "with scholarly precision" all the references in Macaulay's *Essay on Milton*?

Do you observe that my average girl has had no time to read any of the twenty to forty pages of reference works in Roman history of which she must prepare an abstract within two days; for as yet Roman history is not required every day in the week? She has had no time for music, and a scant half-hour for exercise. If her mother insists on her going to bed at nine o'clock, as I hope she does, she has had barely time to prepare thoroughly the routine work in her regular studies. The study periods which she may have in school the next day offer some ground of hope, but ordinarily they will be required to put a final polish on lessons already prepared. How shall we expect of her the student's joy in investigating for its own sake? Above all, how shall we expect that definite, well-matured opinion upon the inner meaning of *Lycidas* which comes only after a thorough mastery of the simple meaning of the lines, after the poem has grown familiar and lain fallow in the brain for many long days or years?

O ye higher powers who set tasks for the little children under our care, pray don't forget that they are, and of a right ought to be, little children. Don't demand of us that we force these childish minds. What they give us naturally is charming in its truthfulness and awakening consciousness of beauty. Pray don't demand subtlety or set up an inhuman standard of excellence. There are many years before them in which to learn a number of things—or, if there are not, so much the more reason that their youth should be made pleasant to them. Let them be permitted to enjoy the study of the glories of their mother-tongue, instead of finding it a grievous burden.